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# The anonymous tract known as *Be Mircna Laga* ('Concerning Laws of the Mercians')

## *Textus Roffensis*, f. 39v

Translated from Old English and edited  
Dr Chris Monk

### **Abstract:**

'In the laws of the Mercians, a ceorl's wergild is 200 shillings. A thegn's wergild is six times as much, that is 12 hundred shillings. Then, according to Mercian laws, the single wergild of a king is the same as the wergild of six thegns, that is 30 thousand pennies, which is 120 pounds in total...'

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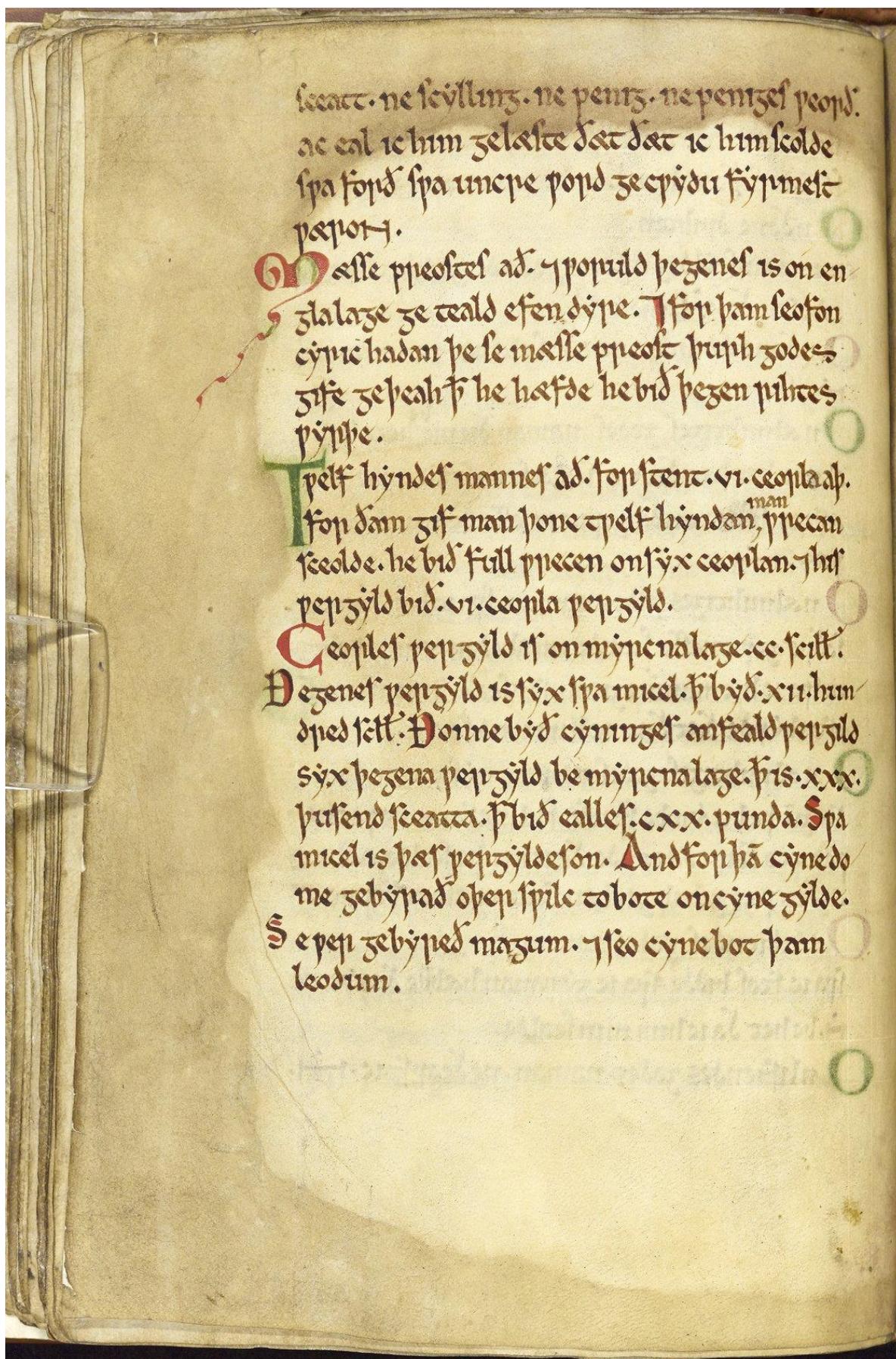
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Textus Roffensis, Rochester, Cathedral Library, MS A. 3. 5, f. 39v



## The anonymous tract known as *Be Mircna Laga* ('Concerning Laws of the Mercians'), *Textus Roffensis*, f. 39v

Translated from Old English and edited by Dr Christopher Monk © 2018

Date: probably ninth-century<sup>1</sup>

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In the laws of the Mercians, a ceorl's wergild is 200 shillings.<sup>2</sup> A thegn's wergild is six times as much,<sup>3</sup> that is 12 hundred shillings. Then, according to Mercian laws, the single wergild of a king is the same as the wergild of six thegns, that is 30 thousand pennies,<sup>4</sup> which is 120 pounds in total. It is the greatest of the wergilds in [the 'folk-right' of the people, according to Mercian laws].<sup>5</sup> And for that kingdom there happens to be a further compensation within the king-payment. The wergild belongs to his family, and the king-*bot* **to** the people.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Though this legal tract is associated with a compilation of texts made by Wulfstan of York, archbishop from 1002 to 1023, there is nothing to suggest Wulfstan composed it. On the contrary, the material deals with the kingdom of Mercia, and as Mercia ceased to have an independent kingdom after the 880s, the text likely dates to before that time: see Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century*, vol. 1 (Blackwell, 1999), pp. 391–93. It has been suggested that *Be Mircna Laga* may derive from traditions of Mercian oral law: see Tom Lambert, *Law and Order in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> A ceorl is the lowest ranked freeman in Anglo-Saxon society. The *wergild* (literally 'man-payment') was the monetary value placed on a free person's life in the context of compensation laws.

<sup>3</sup> A thegn (or 'thane') is a higher ranked freeman, owing loyalty directly to his lord, or to the king.

<sup>4</sup> Or 'sceats'/'sceattas'.

<sup>5</sup> The bracketed text is missing in the Old English; see note 7 below.

<sup>6</sup> Old English *cynebot*, meaning something like 'king's compensation'. I've preserved the Old English element *-bot*, here, in order to distinguish it from the *-gild* (also *-gylt*) element that appears in *wergild* and *cynegild*, and which essentially also has the meaning of 'payment' or 'compensation'.

The Old English text, directly from *Textus Roffensis*

N.B. The digital facsimile of this text can be found by going to:

<http://luna.manchester.ac.uk/luna/servlet/detail/Man4MedievalVC~4~4~990378~142729?page=0>.

Then type 'n87' into the page search box; the text begins halfway down the left-hand folio with the large red 'C', and continues to the bottom of the page.

Editorial notes:

The layout approximates that of the manuscript: display and other coloured letters have been represented; and single words which are split over two lines are hyphenated. Punctuation has been modernised. Word-division and capital letters have been normalised. Scribal abbreviations have been expanded and are indicated by italics, except I have preserved the Tironian nota for the Old English word *and* ('and'), which is represented by '7'. The Old English letters *ash* 'æ', *eth* 'ð', and *thorn* 'þ' (and their upper-case equivalents) have been preserved, though the letter 'w' has been substituted for the Old English letter *wynn* 'ƿ', thus avoiding confusion with the letter 'p'.

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**C**eorles wergyld is on Mircna laga cc scillinga.

**Ʒ**eogenes wergyld is syx swa micel, þæt byð xii hun-  
scillinga. **Ʒ**onne byð cyninges anfeald wergild  
syx þegenas wergyld be Mircna laga, þæt is xxx  
þusend sceatta, þæt bið ealles cxx punda. **S**wa  
micel is þæs wergyldes on.<sup>7</sup> **A**nd for þam cynedo-  
me gebyrað oþer swilc to bote on cynegylde.

**S**e wer<sup>8</sup> gebyreð magum, 7 seo cynebot þam  
leodum.

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<sup>7</sup> 'Swa micel is þæs wergyldes on **folces folcrist be Myrcna laga.**' The scribe accidentally omitted the second half of the sentence, which does however appear in two other manuscripts that contain a copy of this text.

<sup>8</sup> *Wer* is here used as shorthand for *wergild*.